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SUBJECT: DAK LAK: GRADUAL PROGRESS ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND FAMILY
REUNIFICATION

REF: A) HCMC 740 B) HCMC 029 C) HCMC 968

HO CHI MIN 00000741 001.2 OF 004

CLASSIFIED BY: Seth Winnick, Consul General, HCMC, State.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(C) Summary: A visit by the Consul General to Dak Lak July 6-7 confirmed that the province has been making gradual progress on religious freedom and ethnic minority family reunification issues since new leadership was installed in December 2005. Officials of the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) told us that the province is more proactive, especially since Easter, in registering churches, a process that the new People's Committee Chairman committed to accelerate. Our discussions with religious leaders and officials and a visit to a village in central Dak Lak (REF A) clearly indicated that ethnic minority activists continue to operate in the province. In a first-ever meeting with us on the subject of separatism, Dak Lak security officials said that Kok Ksor and other U.S.-based members of the FULRO organization continue to foment unrest to create an independent ethnic minority state in the Central Highlands. While the exact level of ethnic minority separatism remains unclear, the presence of Dega activists in the province (and with the SECV) complicates how the government responds to a range of other issues, including religious freedom and family reunification (VISAS-93) cases. End Summary.

12. (SBU) On July 6 and 7, the Consul General and PolOff traveled to the Central Highlands province of Dak Lak to meet new provincial leaders and to assess ethnic minority, family reunification and religious freedom concerns. In a meeting with People's Committee Chairman Lu Ngoc Cu (promoted in December 2005 to Chairman and to the rank of General within the Ministry of Public Security), the Consul General emphasized the importance of progress on religious freedom and human rights issues in Dak Lak. Dak Lak is one of perhaps ten provinces in Vietnam that attracts attention in the United States, the Consul General told Cu. The USG and GVN would not have been able to move the relationship forward at the pace we have without progress on religious freedom and family reunification issues in the Central Highlands. Acknowledging recent efforts to improve conditions for the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) and other Protestant house church groups (ref B), the Consul General encouraged faster and more comprehensive progress. He noted that the USG recognizes that religious freedom issues are complicated in the Central Highlands and that some persons may seek to use religion as a cover for ethnic minority separatism. He emphasized that the U.S. rejects this approach and any effort to undermine the territorial integrity of Vietnam.

3.(SBU) In contrast to the tough exchange with Cu in September 2005, when he was head of the provinces' Department of Public

Security (ref C), Cu now said that the province would do whatever it could to facilitate the VISAS-93 family reunification process. Those that wished to leave Vietnam legally would be allowed to do so; those that wish to return would be equally welcome. Turning to religious freedom issues, Cu said that he "shared our view" that the province should accelerate the registration and recognition process for Protestant congregations. The province is working to educate officials at the district- and village-level on their responsibilities under Vietnam's legal framework on religion. Over the past few months, Dak Lak has registered 34 SECV "meeting points" in addition to eight congregations that are officially recognized.

4.(SBU) Turning to economic issues, the Consul General expressed the USG's interest in supporting the most-rapid development of the province possible. The U.S. also wanted to support efforts to promote the well-being and integration of the ethnic minority community in the economy. To that end, the USG was hopeful that the agricultural NGO ACDI/VOCA might be able to expand its successful cocoa-growing project from the Mekong Delta into Dak Lak, with a particular focus on the ethnic minority community.

15. (SBU) Chairman Cu was clearly less comfortable discussing economic development issues. Referring to the province's five-year plan, Cu said he would seek to complete major irrigation and hydro-electric projects, build new roads and develop eco-tourism. The province also would seek to develop the food processing sector, he told the CG. The province will complete the "equitization" of most of its state-owned enterprises; for example, the province has sold the Dak Lak tourist company to Saigon Tourist, Cu said. (Note: Cu did not seem to know that the HCMC-based Saigon Tourist also is an SOE. End Note.) Cu did not discuss the ACDI/VOCA initiative.

Department of Public Security

6.(SBU) At our request, the Consul General met with senior

HO CHI MIN 00000741 002.2 OF 004

provincial Department of Public Security officials to begin a dialogue on security issues linked to ethnic minority separatism. Vice Director Tran Ky Roi (who attended a 10-day anti-terrorism seminar in ILEA in Bangkok) told us that elements of "FULRO," the separatist ethnic minority organization continue to have a presence in the Central Highlands. Although they are active in Dak Lak, the problem is more acute in neighboring Gia Lai province.

7.(C) FULRO continues to be led by Montagnard Foundation President Kok Ksor from the United States, Ky said. Although there are "fewer" armed operations than in the past (FULRO was disbanded in an agreement with the GVN in 1992), Dak Lak continues to note some "armed operations" involving home-made bombs and weapons, in particular during the "violent protests" in April 2004. Kok Ksor also is encouraging political unrest in the province, Ky said. The provincial security apparatus has intercepted many of the phone calls between "North Carolina" and operatives in Dak Lak, which demonstrate Ksor's leading role in fomenting unrest. The province has given recordings and pictures to Hanoi to share with the USG, Ky said. Ky argued that Dak Lak has no political or religious prisoners. Only those that "violate the law" have been arrested.

18. (C) Ky said that Kok Ksor invented "Dega Protestantism" as another way of continuing FULRO activities in the Central Highlands. For example, there were 3,000 Dega Protestants in the Dak Lak district of Ea Hleo, but these worshipers have since switched to the SECV of house church organizations such as the Seventh Day Adventists or United World Mission Church of Vietnam. Ky said that delays in registration of SECV or other churches was due to the separatist threat, although there are a few "Dega" within the SECV hierarchy in the province. In fact, the police are working to instruct local officials to speed up registration. Where "conditions" allow, the province also has

allowed SECV congregations to function without official registration or recognition. That said, the province will not permit a person with only a second or third grade education to lead a church congregation. These people cannot lead a community effectively and "correctly," Ky stated. To address this issue, the province is working with the SECV to open up new training courses for pastors.

9.(C) We asked Ky about the case of Y Muon, the son of an SECV Pastor who was sentenced to seven years in prison in 2005 for separatist activities. Ky said that Y Muon and two other brothers were arrested on suspicion of separatist activities. The two other brothers were released after detention to their parent's custody. However, in the case of Y Muon, police developed sufficient evidence to demonstrate that Y Muon was one of Kok Ksor's "key contacts" in the Central Highlands, who received orders directly from Kok Ksor. His job was to recruit new students and intellectuals to join the movement. As far as the GVN was concerned, people like Y Muon and others were "terrorists." Contacts within the SECV told us that they "were not sure" why Y Muon was arrested and convicted, although he had links with "bad people."

10.(SBU) The Consul General noted that it is illegal for anyone to use the territory of the United States to foment armed rebellion in another country. That said, speech and protest are protected, including those who criticize other governments. Similarly, while the U.S. will not countenance any effort to undermine Vietnam's territorial integrity, those inside Vietnam who have grievances or opinions should be allowed to air them peacefully.

Religious Freedom Developments

11.(SBU) PolOff subsequently met with the Dak Lak representative board of the SECV as well as with officials of the provincial Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) to review specific developments in religious freedom. The SECV told us that, of approximately 120,000 SECV members in the province, 40 congregations representing 20,000 believers are registered or recognized under the legal framework on religion. Another 60,000 to 70,000 can gather in small groups of between 30 and 50, representing four or five families. The rest, particularly in the districts of Ea Sup, Ea Hleo and Buon Don, can only worship at home. SECV leaders said that increased progress in registering and operating meeting points has been notable since January 2006, with a particularly up-tick in registration and cooperation since Easter 2006. (During Easter, with the exception of Ea Hleo, provincial officials,"as a special gesture," allowed almost all SECV meeting points in the province to hold large services, according to a senior SECV official.)

12.(SBU) Provincial officials have approved the SECV's nomination of eight new pastors and the appointment of 24 recent graduates of a bible training class to Lay Pastor status within

HO CHI MIN 00000741 003.2 OF 004

the SECV. The SECV also is working with the province to open a new training course for 40 new pastor-candidates. Provincial officials have promised the SECV that 100 of the province's 310 meeting points will be registered legally by year-end. Therefore, by year-end 70,000 of the SECV's members will belong to legally-accredited churches, the pastors told us.

13.(SBU) Turning to restrictions on gathering in Ea Sup and other districts, the SECV does not have qualified leaders there. Of the 35 students in the most recent bible training class, none were from Ea Sup. This restricts the ability of SECV to legalize congregations there. On the positive side, the government has lifted travel restrictions on SECV officials, so grassroots development in Ea Sup can take place.

14. (SBU) The SEV pastors also noted some improved cooperation with provincial officials to resolve problems. For example, village officials recently named the leader of a SECV meeting

point in Krong Pac district, a clear violation of the legal framework. SECV leaders protested to more senior officials, who overturned the decision and "educated" the local officials on proper procedure.

¶15. (SBU) One senior SECV leader noted to us that, since January 2006, provincial officials have stepped up their delivery of aid to ethnic minority communities. The province also has stepped up land distribution to ethnic minorities, a report confirmed by an international NGO official working in the area. The province also has reduced the deployment of police and military personnel to ethnic minority villages. The SECV pastor was aware of 12 cases of beatings of ethnic minority individuals by police in previous years, but had not heard of any in 2006.

¶16. (SBU) CRA officials told us that the province is working to operationalize the legal framework on religion for Protestants in the province. In addition to the SECV, which they estimated had 90,000 adherents, the CRA also was facilitating the operation of 10,000 members of house church groups, including the Seventh Day Adventists, and the UWMC. The province also is seeking to provide land to some of the eight recognized churches belonging to the SECV. According to the CRA, the SECV now has registered congregations in all of Dak Lak's districts save Ea Sup. In Ea Sup, the biggest challenge is building capacity among potential church leaders in the district. This includes ensuring that such leaders demonstrate that they have no "FULRO" connection. The CRA officials confirmed that the province has pledged to register another 60 SECV congregations by year-end as well as to hold a training course for another 50 pastoral candidates.

Why not like Gia Lai?

¶17. (SBU) We asked SECV and CRA officials why Dak Lak could not emulate Gia Lai province's approach to registering the SECV. In Gia lai, despite a shortage of trained personnel, all of the SECV's meeting points are registered. Designated SECV pastors take responsibility for the operation of multiple meeting points until new church workers can be assigned. Dak Lak CRA officials told us that "conditions" in Gia Lai were different. SECV colleagues were more explicit. Perhaps 50 of the current SECV leadership in Dak Lak have Dega roots, we were told, complicating the environment in the province. In contrast, in Gia Lai, the SECV has made a clean break with those who supported Dega, allowing for more rapid progress in the registration process.

Comment

¶18. (C) The elevation of MPS General Cu to People's Committee Chairman and the promotion of another Deputy with military experience to the post of Party Secretary highlights the continued preoccupation of the GVN with ethnic minority separatism. While we take the police allegations of ongoing FULRO armed activity with a hefty dose of skepticism until we see concrete evidence, our visit to a village in central Dak Lak (septel) clearly indicated that ethnic minority activists are operating in the province. Their exact activities remain unclear, but the knee-jerk tendency of Dak Lak officials is to equate any ethnic minority dissent or protest with separatism. The presence of Dega activists in the province (and within the SECV) complicates how the government responds to a range of other issues, including religious freedom, family reunification and economic development. For example, the province will vet SECV congregations one by one and will not grant blanket registration.

¶19. (SBU) That said, our visit confirms a trend of gradual, but meaningful progress in Dak Lak on religious freedom and family reunification issues since Dak Lak's new leadership was

HO CHI MIN 00000741 004.2 OF 004

installed in December 2005. Suspicion of the U.S. is reduced

and we see greater readiness to engage in constructive dialogue.

For example, our meeting with the DPS Vice-Director to discuss the Dega movement, although somewhat scripted, was the first of its kind in the Central Highlands. Religious affairs officials who in earlier visits rejected the existence of house church groups in the province, now discuss the process of registration with us and express interest in learning about how religious affairs are managed in the United States. Security officials have acknowledged to us for the first time that strengthening mainstream religious organizations and giving ethnic minority communities viable options is a critical element in any strategy to weaken the allure of the Dega Protestant movement. In contrast to past discussions on VISAS-93 cases, where the province made clear that it wanted to prevent family reunification to punish those that initially fled to the United States, Dak Lak now has resolved successfully the vast bulk of VISAS-93 cases.

WINNICK